CHAPTER EIGHT

Letters to "Henriette"

[*Particularly after the publication of* Julie *in 1761 and* Emile *in 1762, Rousseau received many letters from admiring readers, many of whom asked him for advice about their personal lives. The identity of the woman who called herself "Henriette" is not known and, at first, Rousseau assumed that his correspondent was Suzanne Curchod, a young woman from Geneva who was at one time engaged to Edward Gibbon and later married the financier Necker. "Henriette" wrote to Rousseau saying that, as a woman who was no longer young, not beautiful, and without a great fortune, she sought her happiness through the pursuit of knowledge that would satisfy her and be a resource for attracting friends. She asked for Rousseau's advice about how she should go about seeking the tranquillity of heart she desired and urged him to reconsider his reservations about women who pursued learning.*]

May 7, 1764

I am not hoodwinked, Henriette, about the object of your letter, nor about your dating it from Paris either. You are looking less for my opinion about the decision you have to make than for my approval for the one that you have made. On each of your lines I read these words written in large characters: *Let us see whether you will have the audacity to condemn someone who thinks and writes this way to no longer thinking or reading.* This interpretation is assuredly not a reproach and I can only be grateful to you for putting me in the number of those whose judgments matter to you. But while flattering me you are not requiring me, I believe, to flatter you, and to disguise my sentiment from you, when it pertains to your life's happiness, would be to respond badly to the honor you have done me.

Let us begin by setting aside useless deliberations. It is no longer a question of reducing yourself to sewing and embroidering. Henriette, one does not take off one's head like one's bonnet, and one does not

return to simplicity any more than to childhood. Once it is in effervescence the mind always remains that way, and anyone who has thought will think for his whole life. That is the greatest misfortune of the condition of reflection: the more one feels its ills, the more one increases them, and all our efforts to leave it do nothing but bog us down more deeply in it.

Let us not speak about changing condition then, but of the advantage you can draw from yours. This condition is unfortunate; it must always be so. Your ills are great and without remedy. You feel it, you groan at it. And in order to make them bearable, you are seeking at least a palliative for them. Isn't that the object that you are proposing for yourself in your plans of studies and occupations?

Your means can be good for another purpose, but it is your end that is deceiving you: not seeing the genuine source of your ills, you are seeking that alleviation for them in the cause that gave birth to them. You are looking for them in your situation, whereas they are your work. How many people of merit, born into well-being and fallen into indigence, have borne it with less success and happiness than you have and nevertheless do not have those sad and cruel awakenings whose horror you describe with so much energy. Why so? Doubtless, you will say, they do not have so sensitive a soul. I have not seen anyone in my life who would not have said the same thing. But in the end what is that so vaunted sensitivity? Do you want to know, Henriette? In the final analysis it is an amour-propre that compares itself. I have put my finger on the seat of the illness.

All your miseries come and will come from having displayed yourself. By that manner of seeking happiness it is impossible for one to find it, for it is impossible ever to obtain the place one lays claim to in other people's opinion. If they grant it to us in some respect they refuse it to us in a thousand others and a single exclusion torments more than a hundred preferences flatter. It is much worse in a woman who, wanting to make herself into a man, to begin with puts all her own sex against her and is never taken at her word by ours, so that her pride is often as mortified by the honors that are given to her as by those that are refused to her. She never has precisely what she wants, because she wants contradictory things, and because, by usurping the rights of one sex without wanting to renounce those of the other, she fully possesses neither.

But the great misfortune of a woman who displays herself is to attract, to see only people who act as she does and to turn away the solid and modest merit that does not display itself at all and that does not

run to where the crowd is assembled. No one judges men so badly and so falsely as people with pretensions; for they judge them only after themselves and what resembles them, and that is certainly not to see the human race by its beautiful side. You are dissatisfied with all your societies, I can well believe it. Those in which you have lived were the least suited to making you happy. You found no one in them in whom you could take that confidence that soothes. How would you have found it among people solely preoccupied with themselves alone, whom you asked for the foremost place in their hearts, and who do not even have a second place to give? You wanted to shine, you wanted to take precedence, and you wanted to be loved. These are incompatible things. You must choose. There is no friendship at all without equality, and there is never any equality recognized between people with pretensions. It is not enough to need a friend in order to find one; one must also have something to provide for someone else's needs. Among the provisions that you have made, you have forgotten that one.

The proceeding by which you acquired acquaintances does not justify either its object or its employment. You wanted to appear to be a philosopher; that was to renounce being one, and it was much better to have the air of a girl who is waiting for a husband than of a wise man who is waiting for incense. Far from finding happiness in the effect of the efforts that you have given to appearance alone, you have found in it only apparent goods and genuine ills. The condition of reflection into which you have thrown yourself has caused you incessantly to make painful returns upon yourself and you nevertheless want to banish these ideas by the same sort of occupation that gave them to you.

You see the error of the path you have been taking, and, believing you are changing it by means of your plan you are still proceeding toward the same goal by means of a detour. It is not at all for yourself that you want to return to studying; it is still for others. You want to make provisions of knowledge to take the place of looks at another age: you want to substitute the empire of knowledge for that of charms.

You do not want to become the indulgent companion of another woman, but you want to have indulgent male companions. You want to have friends, that is to say, a court. For the friends of a young or old woman are always her courtiers. They serve her or leave her; and you are taking from afar measures for holding onto them so as always to be the center of a sphere, small or large. Without that I believe that the provisions that you want to make would be the most useless thing for the object that you believe in good faith you are proposing for yourself. You want, you say, to put yourself in a condition to understand others.

Do you need a new competence for that? I do not know, in truth, what opinion you have of your present intelligence but were you to have Oedipuses for friends, I hardly believe that you very much want to understand the people whom you cannot understand now. Why, then, so many efforts to obtain what you already have? No, Henriette, that is not it; but when you will be a sibyl you want to proclaim oracles, your true plan is not so much to listen to others as to have auditors yourself. Under the pretext of laboring for independence you are still laboring for domination. It is thus that, far from alleviating the weight of opinion that is making you unhappy, you want to aggravate its yoke. This is not the way to procure more peaceful awakenings for yourself.

You believe that the only relief from the painful feeling that is tormenting you is to distance yourself from yourself. I, completely to the contrary, I believe that it is to bring you closer to yourself.

Your entire letter is full of proofs that until now the sole goal of your behavior has been to put yourself under other people's eyes in an advantageous manner. How, having succeeded in public as much as anyone and taking away from it so little internal satisfaction, have you not felt that the happiness you need is not there and that it was time to change plans? Yours might be good for glory but it is bad for felicity. One must not at all seek to distance oneself from oneself because that is not possible and because everything leads us back there however reluctantly. You agree that you passed some very sweet hours in writing to me and speaking to me about yourself. It is surprising that this experience does not put you on the way and does not teach you where you should seek, if not happiness, at least peace.

Nevertheless, although my ideas in this differ very much from yours, we are just about in agreement about what you should do. Henceforth study is the lance of Achilles that must cure the wound that it has made.[1] But you want only to quell the pain, and I would like to remove the cause of the illness. You want to distract yourself from yourself by means of philosophy. I, I would like it to detach you from everything, and return you to yourself. Be certain that you will be content with others only when you do not need them any longer, and that society will become agreeable to you only when it ceases to be necessary for you. Never having to complain about those from whom you will require nothing, it is then that you will be necessary for them, and feeling that you suffice to yourself, they will be grateful to you for the merit that you are willing to put in common. They will no longer believe that they are doing you a favor, they will always be receiving it; the pleasures of life will seek you out by the mere fact that you will not be seeking them

out, and it is then that, satisfied with yourself without being able to be dissatisfied with others, you will have a peaceful sleep and a delightful awakening.

It is true that studies made with such contrary intentions must not resemble one another very much and there is certainly a difference between the cultivation that adorns the mind and the one that nourishes the soul. If you had the courage to savor a project whose execution will be very painful to you at first, it would be necessary to change your directions a great deal. That would require thinking about it well before beginning the work. I am sick, occupied, dejected, I have a slow mind, painful efforts are necessary for me to depart from the small circle of ideas that are familiar to me, and nothing is more distant from them than your situation. It is not just for me to tire myself out for nothing, for I can hardly believe that you would want to undertake to recast, so to speak, your entire moral constitution. You have too much philosophy not to see this undertaking with fright. I would despair of you if you set yourself to it easily. Thus let us not go any farther at present. It is enough that your principal question has been resolved. Follow the career of letters. No other is any longer left for you to chose.

These lines, that I am writing to you in haste, absentminded and suffering, perhaps do not say anything of what needs to be said: But the errors that my precipitation might have caused me to make are not irreparable. What was necessary before everything was to make you feel how much you interest me and I believe that you will not doubt it upon reading this letter. Up until now I regarded you only as a beautiful thinker who, if she had received a character from nature, had taken care to stifle it, to annihilate it under the exterior—like one of those masterpieces cast in bronze that one admires from the outside and whose inside is empty. But if you still can weep over your condition it is not without recourse; as long as a little substance is left in the heart, one must not despair of anything.

Motiers, November 4, 1764

If your situation, Mademoiselle, barely leaves you time to write to me, you must conceive that mine leaves me even less to answer you. You are only subjected to your business and the people you are dependent on and I, I am subjected to that of every piece of business and everyone because, judging me to be free, everyone wants to dispose of me by right of first occupant. Furthermore, always harassed, always suffering,

overwhelmed with troubles and in a condition worse than yours, I use the few moments they leave me in breathing. I am too occupied not to be lazy. For a month I have been seeking a moment to write to you at my ease: this moment does not come, thus I must steal the time to write to you, for you interest me too much to leave you without an answer. I know few people who attach me more and no one who astonishes me as much as you do.

If you have found in my letter many things that did not square with yours: that is because it was written for someone other than you. In your situation there are such striking relations with that of another person who precisely was at Neufchâtel when I received your letter that I did not at all doubt that that letter came from her, and I was thrown off the scent with the idea that someone was trying to put me off it. Thus I spoke to you less based on what you told me about your character, than based on what was known to me about hers. I believed I found the reason for the internal malaise whose detailed account you were giving me in her mania for displaying herself, for she is a certified learned woman and fine wit. I began by attacking that mania as if it were yours, and I did not doubt at all that by leading you back to yourself I would be returning you to the repose from which, according to me, nothing is farther than the condition of a woman who displays herself.

A letter written on such a case of mistaken identity must contain many doltish remarks. Nevertheless in my error there was this good thing: it gave me the key of the moral condition of the person to whom I thought I was writing, and based on that assumed condition I believed I glimpsed a plan to follow to draw you away from the anguish that you were describing to me, without having recourse to distractions that, according to you, are the only remedy for it, and that, according to me, are not even a palliative. You inform me that I deceived myself, and that I saw nothing of what I believed I saw. How would I find a remedy for your condition, as this condition is inconceivable to me? You are a distressing and humiliating enigma to me. I believed I knew the human heart and I know nothing about yours. You are suffering, and I cannot relieve you.

What, because nothing foreign to you satisfies you, you want to flee yourself, and because you have cause to complain of others, because you despise them, because they have given you the right to do so, because you feel inside yourself a soul worthy of esteem, you do not want to console yourself with it for the disdain that those who do not resemble it inspire in you? No I do not understand anything about this strangeness; it is beyond me.

Shouldn't this sensitivity that makes you dissatisfied with everything have turned in on itself? Shouldn't it have nourished your heart with a sublime and delightful sentiment of amour-propre? Doesn't one always have in it the recourse against injustice and the compensation for insensitivity? It is so rare, you say, to meet a soul; that is true, but how can one have one, and not take pleasure in it; if upon probing one feels the souls of others to be limited and narrowed, one loses enthusiasm for them, one detaches oneself from them—but after having been so uncomfortable in someone else's house, how pleasant it is to return to one's own house. I know how much the need for attachment distresses sensitive hearts with the impossibility of forming them. I know how sad that condition is but I know that it nevertheless has some sweet pleasures, it causes streams of tears to be shed, it gives a melancholy that bears witness to us of ourselves, and that one would not want not to have. It causes solitude to be sought out as the only refuge in which one finds oneself with everything that one has reason to love. I cannot say it to you again too many times: I know neither happiness nor peace in distance from oneself; on the contrary, I sense more every day that one can be happy on the earth only in proportion as one removes oneself from things and one draws near to oneself. If there is some feeling sweeter than esteem for oneself, if there is some occupation more lovable than that of increasing this feeling, I might be wrong. But that is how I think; judge based on that whether it is possible for me to enter into your perspective, and even to conceive your condition.

I cannot keep myself from still hoping that you are deceiving yourself about the principle of your malaise, and that instead of coming from the sentiment that reflects upon yourself, it comes, on the contrary, from the one that still ties you, unbeknownst to you, to the things from which you believe you are detached and that perhaps you only despair of enjoying. I would like that to be so; I would see a foothold for acting, but if your account is exact I do not see any at all. If I had your first letter under my eyes at present and more leisure to reflect on it, perhaps I would succeed in understanding you and I would not spare my effort, for you genuinely worry me. But that letter is lost in heaps of papers; to find it again would take me more time than is left me, and I am forced to put back this search to other moments. If the uselessness of our correspondence did not make you lose enthusiasm for writing to me it is likely that this would be a means for understanding you in the end. But I cannot promise you any more exactitude in my answers than I am in a condition to put into them. What I do promise you, and which I shall keep very well, is to occupy myself with you very much, and not

to forget you during my life. Your last letter, full of flashes of wit and deep feelings, affects me even more than the preceding one. Whatever you might say about it, I shall always believe that it depends only on the person who wrote it to be pleased with herself and to compensate herself that way for the rigors of her fate.